

Group in sync with autistic children

Weston group helps present shows in Davie

By Scott Fishman
STAFF WRITER

No matter the race, religious background or disability, music has proven to be a unifying force.

With this in mind, the Rotary Club of Weston joined forces with the University of Miami-Nova Southeastern University Center for Autism and Related Disabilities to form Insync With Autism.

Since January, Insync With Autism has put together three free concerts at the David Posnack Jewish Community Center's Orlove Auditorium in Davie. Each event is geared to individuals affected by the complex neurological disorder and their families, with funding coming from each organization.

The open space of the theater allows the children to dance and have fun without worrying about being disruptive. Each event, which draws close to 600 people, encourages the audience to participate by dancing and singing along. Sam Ash music stores donated 200 instruments that are handed out to the children to make them feel like they are a part of the show. Students from Cypress Bay and Western high schools also volunteered during the concerts.

Soryl Cohen and other committee members from the Rotary Club wanted to help provide a place where children with autism and their families can enjoy themselves. "[We] have combined each of our strengths. With Insync

With Autism, it's the perfect marriage," she said. Cohen said the events are worthwhile for not only the children, but parents as well. She said it's especially important because the divorce rate among families who have autistic children is 80 percent. Marlene Sotelo, an assistant director for the UM-NSU center, sees the positive impact these concerts have on families. Many of them might not have the opportunity to go to events like this because of the

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child's behavior, sometimes caused by overstimulation.

"It's just my calling," said Sotelo, who has a background in music therapy and is a certified special education teacher and behavior analyst.

"It's rewarding to know these parents get this happy moment in their lives that can sometimes be troubled and difficult. It brings me great joy."

Along with her efforts with the center, Sotelo helped write, perform, record and release *Make*

A Difference, a song to raise autism awareness and money for Autism Speaks.

Autism hits home for Mona Nasser who serves on the center's constituency board. Her 15-year-old daughter, Adia, received an autism diagnosis when she was 3. It's gratifying for Nasser to hear from parents who say their children have become more social in other places in the community after going to events like this.

"Words can't describe

how I feel as a mother to see my daughter feel comfortable," Nasser said. "These concerts give these young children an opportunity to really be themselves. Music is something they can engage in and feel comfortable. There are no rules here but to enjoy."

The organization is looking for sponsors and donations for future concerts.

For more information, visit www.insyncwithautism.com.

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